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The power of sameness

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The Power of Sameness

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Whether it is our name, hometown or personal characteristic, our similarities could alter our reactions to service failures

"What a coincidence!" This is a familiar line in our lives. We have all experienced that mysterious sensation – hopefully pleasant – triggered by an unexpected connection with a person. As human beings, we tend to attach meanings to this kind of surprising incidents as we hope to make sense of the 'abnormal' events in our lives.

According to a recent study by The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) Business School, we sometimes do more than just giving meanings to these bewildering connections.

The study titled "The Influence of Incidental Similarity on Observers' Causal Attributions and Reactions to a Service Failure" investigates how observers of service failures assign blame or responsibility of the events in relation to their perceived coincidences.

The study was conducted by Prof. **Lisa Wan**, Assistant Professor at the School of Hotel and Tourism Management and Director of Centre for Hospitality and Real Estate Research at CUHK Business School in collaboration with Prof. **Robert S. Wyer Jr**, Visiting Professor at Lindner College of Business, University of Cincinnati.

"We found that when observers are not personally involved in a service failure, their inclinations to blame the provider or the customer can depend on some things that have nothing to do with the failed service but on certain similarities," says Prof. Wan.

The Effect of Incidental Similarity

Previous studies have shown that when consumers identify certain similarities with a salesperson, such as the same last name, birthday or hometown, they are more likely to favour the salesperson and the service or product as a result of the personal connection.

However, will the effect of having these incidental similarities apply to someone who is not directly involved in the sales or service interaction?

To decode this mysterious phenomenon, the researchers conducted a few experiments in which participants were placed in different service failure scenarios.

In one of the experiments, the participants were invited to a restaurant in different time slots where they witnessed a customer complaining to a waitress about her food. The participants either have the same last name as the waitress or the customer.

The result of the study indicated that the participants having the same last name as the customer would blame the waitress for the service failure, whereas those with the same last name as the waitress would blame the customer instead.

“This doesn’t only show that the effect of incidental similarity exists, but also that the effect is valid even when people are only observing and not directly involved in the service failure,” says Prof. Wan.

In another experiment, the participants were asked to read a trip advisor website containing a negative review written by a customer regarding a hotel service. Before they commented on the review, they were also given a cognitive task – by memorising a 2-digit number or a 10-digit number. The result was mixed.

“For the participants who were asked to remember a 2-digit number, the same effect was seen, that is, those having the same last name as the customers would blame the hotel manager for the service failure,” she says.

However, the result did not replicate for those who had to memorise a 10-digit number.

“This shows that the effect is not valid when the participants’ attention is diverted by a high cognitive load.”

Experiments were also carried out involving a service provider displaying a negative or undesirable quality (e.g., rudeness or obesity). In such scenario, participants sharing the incidental similarity with the provider were found to blame the service provider rather than the customer for the failure of service.

Why is that the case?

“People are more likely to blame a negative event on someone they dislike than on someone they like. Since sharing an incidental similarity with the provider will increase an observer’s attention on the provider’s negative or undesirable characteristics, the observer will increase their blame on the provider in this case,” says Prof. Wan.

Implications

This study has extended previous research to include observers who are not directly involved in the service at all. And it reveals that the effect of incidental similarity on observers’ attribution of blame is present both online and offline.

It has significant implications for consumers’ reactions to online reviews which play a major part in our shopping experiences nowadays, as consumers often make their purchase decisions by reading online reviews of a certain product or a shop.

“The study reveals that our reactions to online reviews can be manipulated by something as trivial and accidental as the reviewer’s last name.”

Prof. Wan thinks the study also reflects a unique characteristic in Asian societies.

“Participants in our research are all Asians, who may be particularly sensitive to the similarities between themselves and others and inclined to value social connectedness.”

“Although the effects of incidental similarity have been identified in research on Western cultural samples as well, this difference could be a consideration in evaluating the generalizability of our findings,” she says.

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